



What's next for agriculture: How the next round of federal aid could help Wisconsin farmers recover from COVID-19 challenges

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Media Contact: Grace Atherton, Communications Director, (608) 224-5020, grace.atherton@wisconsin.gov



A commentary by Randy Romanski, Interim Secretary, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection

COVID-19 has created unprecedented challenges for Wisconsin's agricultural industry. Responding to the short and long-term impacts of this pandemic will require immediate, flexible funding opportunities to address urgent and emerging issues in the agriculture economy and food supply chain. Since this pandemic arrived in Wisconsin, the leadership team at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) has been responding to the growing impacts COVID-19 has had on Wisconsin's \$104.8 billion agricultural industry, as well as our robust food sector.

From the farm, to the processing plant, to the distributor, to the grocery store, we have heard how this public health emergency continues to impact agribusiness operations and the ability to put Wisconsin food on the table. After several difficult years, these unexpected and rapidly changing circumstances have presented even more unexpected challenges to producers, processors, and food retailers.

Since the initial onset of COVID-19, consumer behaviors have also shifted several times, from "panic buying" to staying home entirely. Many people began cooking at home more frequently, while others are purchasing more take-out to support their local restaurants. This environment of constant change has made it extremely difficult to keep Wisconsin's agricultural and food supply chain running smoothly.

Congress has rolled out billions of dollars in COVID-19 related aid, but none of it is specifically allocated to state departments of agriculture. It's important to remember that economic measures do not always reach agri-businesses and rural communities equally. In fact, agriculture nationwide only received 1.28% of the first round of federal Paycheck Protection Program dollars before the funding was quickly exhausted. Our farmers need help, and they need it now. The bipartisan, bicameral Farming Support to States Act that was recently introduced at the federal level would provide that help. Here are just a few examples of how Wisconsin could put this aid to the states to work for our food heroes in Wisconsin:

- 1. Expand capacity for small meat producers and processors**

In Wisconsin, small local meat processors have stepped up to keep the food supply chain moving as livestock producers continue to care for animals that will need to find a market. With substantial, flexible funding, low-interest loans or grants could be provided to help these producers and processors invest in measures to build their capacity for the long term.

- 2. Support direct sales of Wisconsin products**

Our state is a national agriculture leader, producing a wide variety of high-quality, nutritious products. COVID-19 has presented many challenges, including creating bottlenecks in the food supply chain. Federal funding could help support the purchase of Wisconsin products for food banks and pantries. Aid could also be provided to farmers' markets to help with the costs associated with delivering food directly to Wisconsin consumers during this period of physical isolation.

3. Help farmers lower their input costs

Wisconsin farmers are well-versed in the ups and downs of their industry. They know better than anyone that, in agriculture, success requires flexibility. Additional funding could help them explore ways to lower their input costs through ecosystem services and other innovative practices so they are more insulated from unexpected market fluctuations.

COVID-19 has presented extremely unusual obstacles to Wisconsin's agricultural and food industries. Just as every state's strengths are unique, so are our challenges. Federal aid directed to states will help us address the urgent and unknown needs of rural communities and agriculture as we recover from the permanent impacts COVID-19. These dedicated resources for the food supply chain will protect the health and well-being of all Americans, while ensuring rural communities are not left behind in the COVID-19 recovery. As Congress returns to work, it's important that they pivot to protecting the farmers, food processors, and other agricultural businesses who have never stopped working to feed our world.

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